JANUARY 31, 1965

# Just One Thing After Another

**P. S. WILKINSON. By C. D. B. Bryan. 441 pp. New York and Evanston: Harper and Row. $5.95.**

By JOHN KNOWLES

THE prolonged education and futile-seeming military service young American men must pass through before beginning to call their lives their own are effectively dramatized in "P. S. Wilkinson." It is a quandary new since World War II. Today it confronts the American boy not with the open road but with the endless stairway from elementary school to—if he is of P. S. Wilkinson's background — preparatory school, a university, military service, often graduate school and then, as a crowning irony, a "training" program to teach him how to do something. Only at the age of 28 or so can he begin a job, a career, life at last.

C. D. B. Bryan, who won the Harper Prize with this first novel, begins showing this frustrating, drawn-out ordeal in—appropriately—post-truce Korea, where Wilkinson is an exasperated intelligence officer counting every last one of his "547 days in this godforsaken place." His superiors are stupid or lechers or both; the country literally stinks, and the Korean people are to be pitied. Discharged in 1960 and back in America, Wilkinson is thoroughly disappointed to find his life just as thwarted here as it had been there. His father, a member of an old Southern family, cannot help him or even reach him. He loves his mother and admires his distinguished stepfather, but they quickly disappear from the novel.

Young Wilkinson turns and turns at the center of his problems. He does not know what he wants to do with his life; he cannot "communicate"; he is moving from idealism to cynicism without ever touching realism. His affairs with girls are unstable and subject to abrupt terminations by him; he is lonely. Thinking that government work will give his life purpose and reinforce his slipping ideals, he applies to the Central Intelligence Agency and is rejected on suspicion of homosexuality. Rebounding from this shock, he seeks out a Baltimore strip-tease dancer who had once told him how skillful he was sexually; she promptly has him beaten up. At last he enrolls in the training program of a Manhattan bank and resumes an affair with a girl he had known while at Yale. Perhaps he is going to "find himself" at last. Then, in an effective stroke of irony, he is recalled to active service as a Reservist during the Berlin crisis of 1961.

C. D. B. Bryan graduated from Yale, served as an officer in Korea, and was recalled as a Reservist during the Berlin crisis of 1961. His father, I. Bryan 3d, belongs to an old Southern family, and his stepfather, John O'Hara, resembles the stepfather in the book. These facts indicate that much more of "P. S. Wilkinson" may also be autobiographical. That would be irrelevant were it not that the chief shortcoming of the novel is one that occurs so often in fiction which is closely autobiographical: the central character is out of focus, seen in uneven proportion and depth and somewhat faceless. Photographing oneself is difficult.

For example, Mr. Bryan's central character tells us that he is in despair, but he only seems exasperated; exasperation is a useful emotion only in comedy, not in serious fiction. Wilkinson is all caught up with himself, and so he doesn't really catch us. He achieves life only when the force of the episode is coming strongly from outside himself—when he is caught cheating, when he is beaten up, when he is trapped in the desert.

The author does convey the circumstances around the central character with frequent success. Korea is convincingly steeped in mud and ambiguity and unreality. The lie-detector test for the C.I.A., conducted by a kind of Dr. Strangelove, has a calmly chilling authority. The girls in P. S. Wilkinson's life are successfully evoked, particularly Hilary, whose point-blank attack on him for clinging to "pretty pictures" instead of seeing life as it is provides one of the novel's most effective scenes.

In the end he resolves his doubts and confusions enough to ask her to marry him. We are presumably meant to feel that this is a very important step toward Wilkinson's self-realization. But the impression doesn't stick. He might have asked her; he might not have; he did. The novel's final effect is not of a personal dilemma resolved but a personal dilemma presented, and presented at great length. The fact remains that the dilemma, the search for honor and relevance in a thwarting world, is an important one facing young Americans today; "P. S. Wilkinson" conveys its frustrations in full.

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